

COVER STORY **CARTOONISTS HIT BACK**

Muhammad and Python

Poking fun at the Prophet is pointless, writes **SAMIR EL-YOUSSEF**. The satire would be better directed at earthly religious powers

Every time I watch *Life of Brian*, the Monty Python classic satirising Jesus Christ, I think about writing something similar about the Prophet Muhammad. The story of early Islam has a hilariously comic side that would be a gift for the Python scriptwriters. Yet I've never tried to write such a version. Obviously, if I did so I would be risking a fatwa. At the same time, I'm also inhibited by a deep-rooted politeness towards religion, which, despite my having embraced the theory of evolution from an early age, remains with me from childhood.

I grew up in a Sunni Muslim community in southern Lebanon in the 1970s, before the rise of political Islam and when religion had no dominant role in society. Nevertheless, for this community, a few areas were regarded as beyond the reach of humour and satire: namely Allah, the Koran, the Prophet Muhammad, and his four successors, Abu Bakr, Omar, Osman and Ali. The sacred was perceived as very remote from daily life; it seems to me that it was this separateness, rather than the fear of punishment, whether earthly or divine, that made most people avoid poking fun at Allah or the Prophet.

The sacred was beyond satire not only because it was the source of meaning in people's lives, but also because making jokes about it was just not the way people chose to express themselves. Swearing at or joking about Allah and his Prophet, something that the impious did regularly, was considered more of a sign of bad education and vulgarity than blasphemy. One was meant to make fun of the familiar; instead of satirising the sources of religion, people poked fun at sheikhs, imams and the obviously too pious. The sheikhs' appetite for food and sex, the parasitic tendencies of the imams, and the attempts of the pious to look and sound learned were all topics of many jokes.

Now with the spread of political Islam, some of which has fascist tendencies and aims, I think those of us on the left who care about advancing secular learning and values should be directing our criticism and satire at worldly religious powers. Instead of drawing a vulgar cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad, thus helping fascist Islamist groups promote their dangerous agendas, why not draw Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the lunatic walking cartoon who is currently president of Iran? From now on, every time I see *Life of Brian*, I'll be thinking of writing *Monty Python's Life of Abu Hamza*.

Samir el-Youssef received the 2005 Tucholsky Award for Freedom of Speech for his writings on Palestine



Ali Farzat (Syria) How to make a terrorist: Farzat shows an extremist leader tinkering with the brains of a new recruit



Ali Farzat Known as "the Shakespeare of Arab political cartoonists", Farzat often warns that all violence is double-edged



Let it be ink to ink

Nabil Abou Hamad (Lebanon) Instead of "an eye for an eye", the Muslim world and the west should disagree with ink and paper alone

CARTOONS



Ahmad al-Aidy (Egypt) From *al-Dostour*: in the post-cartoon Muslim world, Danish products are dangerous contraband. After exchanging code phrases, a contact hands over three pieces of Danish cheese, then warns: "Don't forget: if you're caught, we'll deny we ever knew you"



Yasser Gaessa (Egypt)
The cartoonist's inspiration is destroyed by fear of violence after the furore surrounding the Danish cartoons

What are the limits of satire in Muslim cultures? The NS invited Arab cartoonists to explore the boundaries of free speech in imagery



Amer Salim (Egypt)
From *al-Dostour*: an Arab leader declares, "It's not enough to burn their embassies. We must invade Denmark too!"

IN THE CROSSFIRE